

# When (imagined) evidence explains fictionality\*

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## Abstract

Sometimes, a proposition is fictional in a story in virtue of the fact that other fictional truths are good evidence for it. Cases are presented in which this evidential rule, and not some rule that invokes counterfactuals or intentions, is what explains what is fictional. Applications are made to the question of interpretive pluralism and the problem of imaginative resistance. In the background is pluralism about fictionality: the evidential rule is one of a variety of rules that are needed to account for what is fictional in a story.

## 1 Introduction

Fictions are made, and so everything that is fictional in a story became fictional by some mechanism. But no single mechanism explains all cases. The question of what rules or principles determine what is fictional in a story has no simple answer. This is pluralism about the determinants of fictionality (other kinds of pluralism will be discussed below). The most well-known pluralist may be Kendall Walton, who asserted that the “machinery” by which fictional truths are generated “is devised of rubber bands and paper clips and powered by everything from unicorns in traces to baking soda mixed with vinegar” (Walton 1990, 183). That can sound pessimistic, like there is nothing useful to say about the determinants of fictionality; at its most extreme, this pessimism entails that while readers can know, for example, that it is fictional in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1885) that Huck helps Jim escape, there is nothing to be said about how or why this is fictional. Pessimistic

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pluralism is implausible, so it is fortunate that pluralists do not have to be pessimists (in fact Walton does not seem to be). On the position adopted here, while there is no single rule by which fictionality is determined, in each case some rule or other explains what it is in virtue of which a given proposition is fictional. For example, near the start of chapter 3 of Joyce's (1916) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a sentence that begins, "He hoped there would be stew for dinner." And it is fictional in the novel that Stephen Dedalus hoped there would be stew for dinner. Plausibly, in this case, this proposition is fictional in virtue of the fact that James Joyce intended, in writing the sentence, to make it fictional. Plausibly, in this case, the rule that explains what is fictional is something like "X is fictional if and only if the author wrote the story intending to make X fictional" (precisely what the best intentionalist rule looks like will be discussed in section 5). But in other cases, other rules will explain what is fictional.

This paper describes a rule in which the key notion is that of good evidence. This rule has not been discussed before,<sup>1</sup> but (it will be argued) in many cases it is the rule that is operative in determining what is or is not fictional. The "evidential" rule may be stated as follows: let  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  be the propositions whose fictionality in a story<sup>2</sup>  $S$  has, in some other way, already been determined; then

$X$  is fictional in  $S$  if and only if  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  are good evidence for  $X$ .

Sections 2 and 3 clarify the pluralist position and the evidential rule, and make a preliminary case that that rule is sometimes operative. Sections 4 and 5 will compare the evidential rule to two well-known rules, the Reality Principle and moderate intentionalism, and argue that some cases where those rules fail to be operative are cases where the evidential rule is. Section 6 discusses cases where, it seems, a fictional truth is only weakly supported by other fictional truths. Sections 7 and 8 discuss pluralism in more detail and argue that the evidential rule can be a source of

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<sup>1</sup>Though, as will be discussed in section 4, it is suggested by some things Walton (1990) says when discussing the "Reality Principle."

<sup>2</sup>For simplicity I use "story" and "fiction" interchangeably, even though some stories are non-fiction, and, on some views, some fictions are not stories (e.g. Walton 1990 holds that paintings generate fictional worlds).

interpretive pluralism, and section 9 looks at the rule's consequences for (part of) the puzzle of imaginative resistance.

## 2 Clarifications

The evidential rule is here defended against a background of one kind of pluralism: fictional truths are generated by a variety of mechanisms or rules. This paper's thesis, therefore, is not that the evidential rule explains what is and is not fictional in every case.

In a pluralist framework, a complete theory of fictionality will describe the various rules of fictionality, and delimit each rule's range of application. That is a project too big for one paper, and this paper aims at something more modest: to argue that the evidential rule is among the rules that determines fictionality. It is the operative rule in some cases. While a complete list of the rules that determine fictionality will not be proposed, it will be assumed that the fictionality of some propositions is determined by a rule that appeals to author's intentions, and the fictionality of others by a rule that appeals to counterfactuals or to resemblance to reality; this should not be taken to imply that these rules, together with the evidential rule, exhaust the mechanisms by which something can become fictional.

Rules of fictionality will be written as biconditionals ("X is fictional in S iff ..."), but they should not be understood as universally quantified. Instead, each rule is restricted to the cases where it is operative. For example, with respect to whether it is fictional in *Portrait* that Stephen hoped there would be stew for supper, the intentionalist rule is operative; this means that that proposition is fictional iff the intentionalist condition is met. The fact that, in this case, the evidential rule's conditions are not met is neither here nor there, since that rule is not operative in this case.

To know what the evidential rule says in a given case, we will need to know what is "already determined" to be fictional in that case. Controversy about this will be avoided until section 6; only propositions that are close to being "primary fictional truths" (those whose status as fictional does not depend on the fictionality of any other propositions) will be assumed to already be fictional.

The phrase “good evidence,” as used in the rule, means “evidence sufficient to justify belief.” Suppose your (actual) evidence is that: a yellow bird is in the garden; ravens are black; and, canaries and goldfinches are yellow. This evidence justifies believing that the bird is not a raven, but does not justify believing that the bird is a canary. The evidential rule, therefore, says that if these same propositions are (the only relevant) fictional truths of some story, then it is fictional in the story that the bird is not a raven, but it is not fictional that the bird is a canary.

Some epistemologists say that only truths can be part of your evidence (e.g. Williamson 2000, 201). On their view, even if, when looking at a white wall illuminated by red light, I come to justifiably believe that the wall is red, the proposition that the wall is red is not part of my evidence. Whether or not this is right, a similar requirement does not hold for “P is good evidence for Q,” as used here. Instead, P is good evidence for Q iff, *were one to have P* as one’s evidence, one would be justified in believing Q; some propositions P and Q can satisfy this, even if P is false.

A philosophical theory of evidence says when, and in virtue of what, a body of information is good evidence for a given proposition. Many such theories have been proposed, but none will not be needed here;<sup>3</sup> our intuitive understanding of evidence and justification will be enough.

### **3 Motivating the evidential rule**

A first argument that the evidential rule in fact determines what is fictional in many cases is phenomenological. It looks at what it is like to try to figure out what is fictional in a story. Sometimes we come to know that some proposition is fictional easily and without effort. It is fictional in *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 1813) that Elisabeth Bennet is a native English speaker, but this is not hard to figure out and no one spends time wondering. Other times, we are uncertain what is fictional. For example, in the film *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), Dom Cobb (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) has technology enabling him to enter people’s dreams. He and his team can go many layers deep, entering a dream inside a dream, and so on. To

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<sup>3</sup>One substantive thesis about evidence will be needed in section 9; see note 22.

do this Cobb must be sedated and go into a dream-state himself. During the film he goes several layers deep in dreams, and by the final scene has exited many dreams. Is it fictional in this film that, at the end, Cobb has made it all the way out to reality? Or instead is it fictional that he is still in a dream, or that the film does not decide between these possibilities? When the film ends it is unclear; reaching a conclusion is hard and takes effort. In this and other hard cases, the process of trying to figure out what is fictional often involves looking for other (more primary) fictional truths that are relevant to the question. I submit that this process “feels like” searching for clues, that is, for pieces of relevant evidence. The process, that is, feels like an imaginative analogue of conducting an inquiry.

What is the imaginative analogue of inquiry? When one inquires into whether X, one does not know whether X, and one gathers and surveys facts that, one hopes, will settle the matter. In the imaginative analogue of this, one does not gather and survey true propositions; one does not investigate reality. Instead one gathers and surveys (in imagination) fictional propositions; one investigates a fictional world. So, in inquiry and in its imaginative analogue, different statuses (truth vs fictionality) attach to the propositions gathered and surveyed. What one does with those propositions, on the other hand, is the same in both cases: one tries to figure out whether they are good evidence for X. If they are, the process stops, and, if the process is an inquiry, the “output” is believing X; if the process is its imaginative analogue, the output is, instead, imagining X. (Similarly, if the relevant propositions are good evidence against X, the output is believing, or imagining, not-X; and if those propositions do not settle the matter—possibly the right result in the case of *Inception*—there is no output.)

Now to complete the argument. Suppose, as I have suggested, that trying to figure out what is fictional in hard cases often feels like an imaginative analogue of inquiry. Then these appearances should be taken at face value: appreciators really do often conduct an imaginative analogue of inquiry. But if that is what people actually do, then doing it must often be a good way to figure out what is fictional. The process must sometimes be an appropriate part of appreciating a story; it must tend (when appropriate) to result in imagining X just when X is fictional. For it is unlikely that a commonly-used method to figure out what is fictional is unreliable.

The evidential rule “ratifies” this kind of imagined inquiry as a good way to figure out what is fictional in certain cases, and that is a strong reason to believe that the rule is operative in those cases.

To be clear, this argument does not use the premise that, in general, our methods for reaching conclusions about any given domain are reliable. People can use unreliable methods; astrology was once a widely-used but unreliable method to reach conclusions about the future. The premise instead is that, in the special case of finding out what is fictional, our methods are reliable. What makes fiction unlike the future is that fiction is a social practice, and so how propositions get to be fictional depends, at least in part, on how we try to figure out what is fictional.

I said that in inquiry and in its imaginative analogue one gathers and surveys evidence, or imagined evidence. Gathering here means adding propositions to your body of (imagined) evidence; one, say, re-watches the film for things one missed the first time. What, then, is surveying? I have in mind taking the evidence, or imagined evidence, one has, and trying to determine what it supports. What this is is not always obvious. In an actual inquiry into, for example, whether a suspect had the opportunity to commit the crime, you might know that the suspect was at point A at noon, and that the crime was committed at point B at 1pm; and you might know the city and the transportation options it affords well. It still may take time and calculation to figure out whether this evidence justifies believing that the suspect could have made it to B by 1pm.

Trying to figure out what is fictional in hard cases certainly sometimes involves the imaginative analogue of surveying evidence. A famous scene in James Cameron’s (1997) *Titanic* is an example. At the end of the film the ship sinks, throwing Jack and Rose into the water. Jack finds a large piece of wood, steadies it, and Rose climbs on, but as Jack begins pulling himself up the board twists and they fall into the water. Jack again helps Rose onto the board, decides the board cannot support both of them, and sacrifices his life for her. Some viewers hold that both Jack and Rose could have fit on the board. Whether this is so is not immediately obvious. Sleuths have posted on the internet how they decided the answer was yes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>I have in mind the photographs on this website: <https://imgur.com/gallery/1ItNe>.

They started with what they knew to be fictional (and so what they had imagined while watching): that Jack was this size, and Rose was that size, and the dimensions of the board were such-and-such. They then surveyed this evidence: does it justify believing that both could fit? Since this is a geometric problem that is hard to do in one's head, they manipulated props with the right dimensions to find the answer. And they concluded that both could fit. That some people thought this was the way to decide whether it is fictional in *Titanic* that both could have fit supports the thesis that, with respect to the question of whether both could fit, it is the evidential rule that is operative.<sup>5</sup>

Authors often make some proposition fictional even when earlier fictional truths are strong evidence against it (and so not good evidence for it). To do this, some rule other than the evidential rule must be used. Still, the phenomenon of surprising plot twists is relevant to how important the evidential rule is. Often a plot twist is surprising exactly because it violates expectations formed on the assumption that the evidential rule is operative. In *The Maltese Falcon* (Hammett 1930), Brigid O'Shaughnessy hires private detectives Sam Spade and Miles Archer, and Archer is killed on the case. It is a surprise when O'Shaughnessy turns out to be the murderer. Readers do not expect this, presumably because, before the final revelation, the fictional truths of the novel more strongly support the hypothesis that Cairo, Gutman, or (especially) Cook was the killer. That is, how likely readers thought it was that "X was the killer" would turn out fictional varied with the strength of the evidential support  $Q_1, \dots, Q_n$  gave that hypothesis, where  $Q_1, \dots, Q_n$  are the fictional truths that they had learned so far. Readers' assumptions about how the plot would evolve treated the evidential rule as a kind of default.

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<sup>5</sup>Please note: these viewers also hold that Jack made a mistake in not climbing on with Rose, and so that he was a fool, not a hero. But the question of whether Jack made a mistake does not reduce to the question of whether both could fit. Jack made a mistake only if both he and Rose could have fit on the board, *and* both could have balanced, stably, on the board long enough to be rescued, *and* Jack could have figured this out while swimming in the North Atlantic after surviving a shipwreck. I take no stand here on whether any of these further claims are true.

#### 4 The evidential rule and the reality principle

In a pluralist framework, the evidential rule does not compete with other rules for the status of the One True Rule of Fictionality. Showing that the evidential rule is operative in some cases does not require showing that no other rule is operative in any other case. Still, it is worth discussing some other rules and their limits. It will be argued that, in some cases where those rules are not operative, it is the evidential rule that is operative, and correct explains what is and is not fictional. The two rules to be discussed are the Reality Principle and moderate intentionalism.

According to the Reality Principle, if  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  are the primary fictional truths of  $S$ , then

Q is an implied fictional truth of  $S$  iff, had  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  been true, Q would have been true.<sup>6</sup>

The Reality Principle is in some ways quite close to the evidential rule. In plenty of cases they agree. In the *Titanic* example, the propositions that Jack is this size, and Rose is that size, and that the board is this big, are good evidence that both could fit on the board; also, the counterfactual “if someone had been Jack’s size (and so on, including all the other primary truths), then both could have fit” is true.

The evidential rule and the Reality Principle are similar enough that discussions of the Reality Principle sometimes invoke notions of evidence, inference, and inquiry. Walton writes,

A likely corollary of the Reality Principle is that implications [of some fictional truths by others] follow the lines of what would be legitimate inferences in the real world: if we could legitimately infer  $q$  from  $p$ , we can legitimately infer the fictionality of  $q$  from the fictionality of  $p$  [...]. (Walton 1990, 145)

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<sup>6</sup>This was originally proposed by Lewis (1978); the statement here follows Walton (1990). “Implied” here means “not primary.” (Technically, the restriction to implied fictional truths is not needed, since every proposition counterfactually depends on itself.) Friend (2017b) takes a different approach to the idea behind the Reality Principle; the differences will not matter here.



Also, when Walton argues against the Reality Principle, he sometimes conflates the Reality Principle with the (unstated by him) evidential rule: he presents examples where, he asserts, the primary fictional truths provide only the “flimsiest evidence” for an implied fictional truth, and cases where there is “no evidence relation at all” (Walton 1990, 165; some of these examples are discussed in section 6). Walton also writes this:

A pervasive and especially important form of participation consists in its being fictional of the appreciator [of a story or other representation], in his game, that he investigates reality in certain ways. [...] The process of discovering what is fictional in the work makes it fictional of him in the game that he discovers what is true. RP is especially conducive to such participation, since investigations of fictional worlds in accordance with it mirror investigations of the real world. (Walton 1990, 158-9)

It seems that Walton agrees that readers often engage in an imaginative analogue of inquiry when trying to figure out what is fictional in hard cases; and he seems to think that the Reality Principle can make sense of this activity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>He was wrong to think this; counterfactual dependence and evidential support come apart. Instead, as I argued in section 3, it is the evidential rule that can make sense of this activity. But it is worth mentioning here that Walton’s background views about appreciation, if correct, make the argument in section 3 stronger. Walton holds that a core part of appreciating a fiction is playing a game of make-believe in which one pretends to learn certain things—including, importantly, the things that are true in that fiction (Walton 1990). In the case of written stories, that (pretended) learning often takes the form of learning from the testimony of a narrator. But clearly, in such a game of make-believe, you (pretend to) acquire knowledge of far more propositions than those you are told. Some, maybe a large portion, of that further knowledge comes from pretending to inquire into things not yet known, and concluding such pretended inquiries by pretending to make justified inferences from things one has already—in the game—learned. Section 3 required the premise that imagined inquiry is sometimes an appropriate part of appreciation, and defended that premise by observing that the activity is common. If Walton’s conception of appreciation is right, then the appropriateness of imagined inquiry falls out of a proper understanding of its nature.

But the evidential rule and the Reality Principle are different rules. They come apart. P's being good evidence for Q, and Q's counterfactually depending on P, in general do not go hand in hand. So the rules can disagree about what is fictional in some cases; in such cases, at most one of the rules can be operative. (If Walton thought, maybe only implicitly, that the Reality Principle was the same as the evidential rule, he was mistaken.)

The Reality Principle cannot always operate, because it would make fictional worlds "too big": for any story, there are many true propositions P which the Reality Principle says are fictional, where in fact the story is silent on P (neither P nor not-P is fictional).<sup>8</sup> Irrelevant propositions are one kind of example. If T is true, and whether P is true is not relevant to whether T is true, then T still would have been true, had P's truth-value differed. It follows that if the propositions that are the primary fictional truths of a story are not relevant to some truth T, then T will be an implied fictional truth of that story. Had a girl named Goldilocks broken a chair, eaten some porridge, and fallen asleep in the house of three sentient bears, it (still) would have been true that hydrogen and oxygen form covalent bonds in water molecules. So if the Reality Principle is true, it is true in "Goldilocks" that hydrogen and oxygen form covalent bonds. But this is not true in the story.

In defense of the Reality Principle Walton says, to the contrary, that the claim about covalent bonds is fictional in "Goldilocks"; it is just an unimportant fictional truth, one we are not supposed to attend to or think much about (Walton 1990; see also Friend 2017b). I join those who think this defense fails (e.g., Stock 2017, Abell 2020). If imagining that P is not part of appropriate and complete appreciation of a story, then that is a strong consideration against P's being fictional in the story. But no imaginings about chemistry are needed even for a complete appreciation of "Goldilocks."

In these cases, where a fictional world remains silent on an irrelevant matter, what rule of fictionality is operative, if not the Reality Principle? The evidential rule provides a good explanation of these cases. In the Goldilocks example, the propositions that are the primary fictional truths are not good evidence for any proposition

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<sup>8</sup>The literature contains many discussions of this problem; (Woodward 2011) is a recent survey article.

about the chemical bonds between hydrogen and oxygen in water. So the evidential rule, if it is operative in this case, would explain why no such proposition is fictional. And that is itself good evidence that the evidential rule is operative in this case.

Other cases where the Reality Principle gives out involve over-specificity. If the Reality Principle were always operative, fictional worlds would be more determinate than they in fact are. As an example, Byrne observes that

if *A Study in Scarlet* [the Sherlock Holmes novel] had been told as known fact, the (incompletely described) blood test Holmes discovers therein would have used crystalline sodium hydroxide and a saturated solution of ammonium sulphate. But this is surely an example of implausible detail. (Byrne 1993)

What does the evidential rule say about this case? Observe that no propositions of advanced chemistry (advanced by the standards of late 19th century Britain) are part of our imagined evidence when we read *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle 1887). So the propositions that do constitute our imagined evidence do not support any hypothesis about the chemicals used in Holmes' blood test. The hypothesis that the evidential rule is operative in this case, therefore, explains why no proposition about those chemicals is fictional in the novel.

## **5 The evidential rule and moderate intentionalism**

Intentionalist theories are often presented as theories of what fictions (or artworks generally) mean, where what is fictional in a work is only part of what it means. Since the topic here is fictionality, we may set aside other aspects of meaning, and focus on the thesis that what is fictional in a story depends, at least sometimes, on what the author intended to make fictional. In its most plausible form, an intentionalist rule of fictionality says that, while fictionality depends on intentions, an intention to make something fictional is neither necessary nor sufficient for it to be fictional. The argument is simple (see e.g. Carroll 2002, 323). Suppose an author writes "The purple flowers bloomed early that spring" with the intention of making it fictional that the *orange* flowers bloomed, and that nothing in the story

or its context indicates this proposition as something that could be made fictional through that sentence (e.g., the story is not told by a narrator who, up to this point, consistently confused orange and purple). Then it will be fictional that the flowers were purple; the author's intention was not sufficient to make it fictional that the flowers were orange, and not necessary to make it fictional that they were purple.

If, on moderate forms of intentionalism, intentions are neither necessary nor sufficient, how are they relevant? They are conditionally sufficient: *if* certain conditions are met, *then* the author's intentions fix what is fictional. What conditions? On Carroll's version, the propositions the author intends to make fictional must be such that their being fictional is "compatible with and/or supportable by what has been written—if we are speaking of literary texts—in accordance with the conventions and histories of language and literature" (Carroll 2002, 323). (In the earlier example, the proposition that the flowers are orange does not have this property.) Let us read this condition broadly, so that, for example, interpreting a sentence as used ironically, when a story is told by a narrator who might use irony, counts as an interpretation "supportable by what has been written." The general idea is that the text, considered apart from what the author had in mind, creates a range of possibilities for what is fictional, and the author's intentions then select which possibility from this range is actual. If the author's intentions do not fall in the range of what is possible, then those intentions do no work.<sup>9</sup>

The intentionalist rule is not always operative, and in some cases where it is not, it is the evidential rule that explains what is fictional. One example is Henry James' (1898) *The Turn of the Screw*. The story's narrator reads to some friends a manuscript in which a woman recounts her time as governess to two children in a country house. She becomes convinced that the house, and the children, are

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<sup>9</sup>In that case, if one possibility is best supported by the text, it is the correct; if many are equally well supported, the story is indeterminate on this point.

Although this paper assumes pluralism about the principles by which fictionality is determined, it also holds that the various forms of intentionalism do compete with each other, to be the only principle in which intentions are invoked. Since, I think, moderate actual intentionalism is the best intentionalist rule, other forms of intentionalism, like hypothetical intentionalism (e.g. Tolhurst 1979, Levinson 2006) or extreme actual intentionalism (Stock 2017), will not be discussed.

haunted by two ghosts. She tries to protect the children, but one of them ends up dead. A close reading of the text supplies fictional truths that are some evidence that the governess's account is accurate, and that ghosts really did haunt the children; and also supplies other fictional truths that are some evidence that the governess hallucinated the ghosts (for example, it is never certain that any other character sees any ghosts). Many critics think that the evidence, taken as a whole, is not decisive either way. Suppose they are correct; then if the evidential rule is operative, neither *the ghosts are real* nor *the ghosts are hallucinations* is fictional (the story is indeterminate on this point).<sup>10</sup> By contrast, if intentionalism is operative, then (only) *the ghosts are real* is fictional (James intended for the ghosts to be real). I submit that, in this case, the story is indeterminate, and so the evidential rule is operative.<sup>11</sup>

It may be unclear whether the actual case of *The Turn of the Screw* is as described. Maybe Henry James did not in fact intend that the ghosts be real. Maybe the other fictional truths are in fact good evidence one way or another.<sup>12</sup> But the

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<sup>10</sup>Though see section 8, which provides materials for saying that, if the evidential rule is operative, both the “ghosts are real” and the “ghosts are not real” interpretations may be correct.

<sup>11</sup>On Stecker's version of moderate intentionalism, an intention to make something fictional only succeeds if the author has done enough to convey to the reader what that intention is (Stecker 2010, 50–51). If “enough” just means that readers can know what that intention is, the condition is satisfied in this case: James made his intention clear in a preface (see note 12 below). If instead the intention must be evident just from reading the story and knowing the context in which it was published, vary the case so that the story was first published in a magazine called *Ghost Story Quarterly*. The evidentialist claim about what is fictional remains the correct one. Of course, an intentionalist might say that the intention to make it fictional that the ghosts are real can succeed, in a story like *The Turn of the Screw*, only if other fictional truths are good evidence that the ghosts are real. This proposal faces an inverse problem: the good evidence seems sufficient on its own to make it fictional that the ghosts are real; no extra intention to that effect is needed.

<sup>12</sup>In his 1908 preface to the novella, James wrote that it is a “fairy tale pure and simple,” and, referring to “my pair of abnormal agents,” says “they would be agents in fact; there would be laid on them the dire duty of causing the situation to reek with the air of Evil” (Beidler 1995, 119; 122). But it is possible to take the preface at something other than face value. For a history of the debate over whether the

actual details of the case do not matter. What matters is what would be fictional, if the case were as described. Again, I think it is the evidential rule that gives the right answer.

It is worth noting that even in a case where the evidential rule is operative, and so the author's intention does not make a certain interpretation correct (where here an interpretation is an hypothesis about what is fictional<sup>13</sup>), it may still be that the intended interpretation coincides with the correct one. Moreover, even when the evidential rule is operative, it can be worth knowing which interpretation the author intended. Knowing this may make it easier to find key fictional truths that contribute to making some body of fictional truths good evidence for that interpretation. Knowing the author's intentions has then helped one learn what is fictional. It can, therefore, make sense to ask the author what they intended, even when the evidential rule is operative.

## 6 Weak evidence

If some proposition is fictional, but the other fictional truths are at best weak evidence for it, then it cannot have been made fictional using the evidential rule. There are, without doubt, many cases like this. But in some cases the allegation that the evidence is weak is false. Looking at a few of them will show that the evidential rule is operative in more cases than one might initially think.

In Shell Silverstein's poem "Slithergadee" (Silverstein 1964) the speaker taunts the titular monster, until they utter the final line: "You may catch all the others, but you wo—." About the poem Walton writes,

The Slithergadee did catch the boastful speaker, and we relish his downfall. We know that it caught him because the boasting stopped abruptly in midword. But what an insanely rash inference! The speaker might

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ghosts are real, including details of the story that some critics have thought tip the balance of evidence, see (Beidler 1995).

<sup>13</sup>There is of course much more to interpreting a story than figuring out what is fictional in it, including but not limited to figuring out its symbolism, allusions, formal features, and what morals are to be drawn from it. These are important but I set them aside as outside the topic of this paper.

suddenly have remembered an important appointment or spilled his coffee or swatted a mosquito or hiccupped [...]. (Walton 1990, 162–3)

Walton lists many hypotheses and suggests (in part by using “might” in a context where it naturally bears an epistemic interpretation) that they are at least as well supported by the poem’s primary fictional truths as the hypothesis that the speaker was caught. If so, the primary fictional truths are not good evidence that the speaker was caught.<sup>14</sup>

But the evidential rule can explain why it is fictional in “Slithergadee” that the speaker was caught, because Walton’s suggestion is not plausible. Maybe it was swatting a mosquito that made the speaker stop talking? There is no (imagined) evidence in the poem that there are any mosquitoes around, and the other hypotheses similarly have little going for them (there is no reason to think that the speaker is holding a cup of coffee). We do, however, have (imagined) evidence that there is a monster nearby, who has caught all the others, and whom the speaker is taunting. That is excellent evidence that it was the monster’s catching him that interrupted the speaker’s taunts.

There are more difficult cases where, allegedly, something is fictional despite being poorly-supported by the primary truths. It is fictional in Joseph Conrad’s (1907) novel *The Secret Agent* that Mrs Verloc jumps to her death from a ferry. The relevant primary fictional truths include these: Mrs Verloc was traveling to the continent; she was “distraught after having killed her husband, and was afraid of the gallows”; she “had contemplated drowning herself in the Thames” (Walton 1990, 160); and, crucially, a character reads a newspaper with the headline “Suicide of Lady Passenger from a cross-Channel Boat.” Walton suggests that, as far as this (imagined) evidence goes, it would be irresponsible to conclude that the suicide was Mrs. Verloc.<sup>15</sup> I am willing to grant this. But there is more (imagined) evidence

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<sup>14</sup>Walton presents this case as a counterexample to the Reality Principle. But the epistemic language he uses suggests re-interpreting it, as I have, as a case where the evidential rule is not operative.

<sup>15</sup>As with “Slithergadee,” Walton’s official target here is the Reality Principle, but his use the epistemic vocabulary makes it appear equally aimed at the evidential rule.

than this, and the total evidence is decisive.

Stories almost always have narrators, even if they are sometimes “effaced”—so that very little is fictional about the narrator (for example they never write in the first person), other than that they tell the story (Walton 1990, 365). Maybe some stories are narratorless, but *The Secret Agent* is not one of them. This means that among our imagined evidence is not just the proposition that a newspaper headline mentions a suicide from a ferry, but also the proposition that the narrator chose to tell us that a newspaper headline mentions a suicide from a ferry, after earlier telling us about Mrs Verloc’s affairs. Now in general, that someone has chosen to inform you of P is evidence for more things than P itself is. For example, only the fact that they have informed you of P is evidence that that person had some reason to inform you of P, and against the right background it can also be evidence about what that reason is. An example is Grice’s famous recommendation letter (Grice 1989): when the letter-writer includes the fact that the applicant regularly attends tutorials, you can justifiably conclude that the applicant is not great at philosophy, but what justifies this is *that the writer chose to include this fact*; the mere fact itself is not evidence one way or another. In the case of *The Secret Agent*, the “extra” (imagined) evidence, that the narrator chose to mention the headline at just this point in the story, is enough to make the total (imagined) evidence justify thinking that Mrs. Verloc was the one who jumped.<sup>16</sup>

## 7 More on pluralism

The thesis of this paper is that, often, the evidential rule determines whether a certain proposition is fictional in a story. In other cases other rules are operative. Two such rules, the Reality Principle and moderate intentionalism, have already been discussed. This list is not exhaustive. For example, it is plausible that a rule of fictionality referring to genre conventions is sometimes operative. If in a “western” one character, Jones, wears a black hat, and it is a widely-known convention of westerns that villains wear black hats, then it is fictional that Jones is a villain; and it

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<sup>16</sup>For a similar point, see (Matravers 2014, 88).



has been argued that this can only be in virtue of a rule that refers to conventions.<sup>17</sup>

Pluralism about the determinants of fictionality might seem vacuous: “each rule is right when it is right, and wrong when it is wrong.” Any list of rules meets that condition. But any pluralist theory worth its salt will say more than this: in addition to proposing a list of rules, it will claim that each of them is operative in some interesting range of cases, and describe such cases; none of the rules is vacuous, operative in no case at all. This paper asserts as much for the evidential rule: it presents important cases where that is the rule explaining why something is fictional.

A related complaint might be that the “scope” of each rule of fictionality has not been identified. No general principles have been stated, giving the conditions, for each rule, under which it is the one that is operative. Certainly a complete defense of pluralism will do this. But that is a hard project and cannot be undertaken here. What is more, the arguments above do not require knowledge of such principles. Required only is the ability to know that a certain rule is operative in a given case. Such knowledge is possible even if one does not know a general principle saying when the rule is operative. (Compare: one can know whether a case, for example a Gettier case, is a case of knowledge, without knowing a general principle—an analysis of knowledge—saying which cases are cases of knowledge.)

Nevertheless, some thoughts about the scopes of the rules discussed are worth mentioning. The following suggestions should be understood as tentative. The intentionalist rule is most likely to be operative at a “low level”: when the question is which propositions are made fictional more or less directly by the words on the page, or the images on the screen. The Reality Principle is most likely to be operative in filling in further relevant details of the fictional world. And the evidential rule tends to operate at a higher level, making a proposition P fictional when propositions determined to be fictional by other rules constitute good evidence for P. But

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<sup>17</sup>For the case to work, it had better not be a primary fictional truth that Jones does various villainous deeds. Then there would be good evidence, independent of his hat color, that he is a villain, and the evidential rule could explain the case. The case should be imagined so that, without information about Jones’ hat color, it is unclear who did the evil deeds. For the argument that the Reality Principle gets these kinds of cases wrong, see e.g. (Woodward 2011).

these are meant to be rough generalizations, not applying in every case.

Although this paper does not attempt a precise boundary between the various rules, questions about the boundary between the evidential rule and the Reality Principle are salient. If P is actually true but irrelevant to a story, as the fact that hydrogen and oxygen form covalent bonds in water is irrelevant to “Goldilocks,” then, it was argued, P is not fictional in that story, and the evidential rule explains this. But propositions not expressed by any sentence in a story often get to be fictional by virtue of the Reality Principle; for example, it is fictional in *Pride and Prejudice* that the sky is blue, and the Reality Principle explains this (nothing about the color of the sky is written on the page, nor is there any evidence one way or another about the sky’s color). What, one might wonder, is the relevant difference between these two cases?

Relevance to a story comes in degrees. The color of the sky is not particularly relevant to the goings-on of *Pride and Prejudice*, but it is not as distant as the spectrum of the radiation emitted by Alpha Centauri, nor is it as distant as the chemical makeup of water is to “Goldilocks.”<sup>18</sup> A precise point at which a proposition’s degree of relevance becomes too small for the Reality Principle to be operative cannot be identified, but there is a clear difference between the cases, making it plausible that one is in the domain of the Reality Principle, and the other, of the evidential rule.

This paper defends pluralism about the determinants of fictionality, but other varieties of pluralism exist; some remarks on their relationship might be useful. Another variety of pluralism denies that there is one single fictional world projected by a given story. Instead, an interpretation that associates one fictional world with the story, and another interpretation that associates a different one, might both be correct. Call this interpretive pluralism.

Interpretive pluralists should find some form of pluralism about the determinants of fictionality congenial. The most straightforward way to generate incompatible interpretations of a story is to use different rules of fictionality, or to assign

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<sup>18</sup>I claimed above that even a complete appreciation of “Goldilocks” would omit any imaginings about the chemical makeup of water. The corresponding claim about “the sky is blue,” and *Pride and Prejudice* is, I believe, false.

different domains to some collection of rules. If those interpretations are all correct, then those various rules (or assignments of domains) must all be legitimate. For example, in the literature on fictionality, the Reality Principle is often contrasted with the Mutual Belief Principle (Lewis 1978; Walton 1990): if  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  are the primary fictional truths of  $S$ , then

Q is an implied fictional truth of  $S$  iff it was mutually believed in the author's community that, had  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  been true, Q would have been true.

The Reality Principle and the Mutual Belief principle say different things about, for example, what is fictional about Hamlet's psychology in Shakespeare's play (Shakespeare 1992). (The psychological theory mutually believed in Shakespeare's time, a theory organized around the four humors, is false, and so belief in it brings with it belief in false counterfactuals.) Plausibly, an interpretative practice that gives the Mutual Belief Principle greater scope is just as correct as one which gives the Reality Principle greater scope. Both practices being correct might be a matter of each practice pursuing different but equally legitimate interpretive aims: a greater scope for the Mutual Belief Principle is right when the aim is interpreting as the original audience did, while a greater scope for the Reality Principle is right when the aim is to understand Hamlet (and other characters) as having a real human psychology. (Friend 2017a defends the legitimacy of these two interpretations of *Hamlet* in more detail; Stecker 2003 defends the multiplicity of legitimate interpretive aims.)

Pluralists about the determinants of fictionality who are also interpretive pluralists are, to some extent, relieved of the need to precisely delimit the scopes of the various rules of fictionality. Faced with some interpreters who think that the Reality Principle should be used to answer the question of whether, in "Goldilocks," hydrogen and oxygen form covalent bonds, and others who think the evidential rule should be used, the right response may be that both approaches are legitimate, answering to different legitimate interpretive aims. Placing greater value on the fictional world being similar to the real one is a legitimate aim, but so is placing greater value on having what one imagines, when appreciating the story, be justified by other things one imagines. In such a context this paper's thesis is that the second aim is among the legitimate aims, and is an aim that is commonly adopted.

## 8 Interpretive pluralism via permissive evidence

Another route to interpretive pluralism also exists, that does not involve different interpretations taking different rules to be operative in a given case. Instead, the different interpretations can agree about when the evidential rule is the operative rule.

To have an example, some think that it is correct to interpret the film *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) so that Deckard is a replicant, and also correct to interpret it so that he is human, but not correct to interpret it so that he is both.<sup>19</sup> Since these correct interpretations cannot be combined, this is interpretive pluralism. Now it might be thought that, if the evidential rule is operative in this case, these interpretations cannot both be correct; a body of evidence cannot be good evidence both for P and for not-P.

But in fact this last claim is disputed in epistemology. Some uphold the “uniqueness thesis”: if a body of evidence justifies believing P, then it cannot also justify believing not-P. But others reject uniqueness in favor of “permissivism”: in some cases at least, someone having some evidence E and believing P on that basis can be justified; and someone having the same evidence E and believing not-P on that basis can also be justified. (Indeed, in some cases permissivism also entails that someone having evidence E and withholding judgment about P could be justified.)<sup>20</sup> If, therefore, permissivism is accepted, the evidential rule is compatible with interpretive pluralism. Incompatible interpretations can both be correct, when the imagined evidence is good evidence for each.

## 9 An application: the fictionality puzzle

If an author wants P to be fictional in their story, then, as long as they have not created an unreliable narrator, it is usually enough to write a sentence expressing P

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<sup>19</sup>See e.g. (Bowker 2021, 9). His claim is actually that it is also correct to interpret the film so that it leaves it open whether Deckard is human; the ideas of this section can handle that case as well. (Thanks to a referee for asking about this topic, and for the reference.)

<sup>20</sup>For a summary of the debate, see (Kelly 2014) and (White 2014).

on the page. Cases where this authority fails, therefore, present a puzzle. In some standard examples, authority fails when P is a false moral proposition; well-known is Walton's story containing the sentence "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl," which succeeds in making it fictional that Giselda killed her baby, but fails to make it fictional that she did the right thing (Walton 1994, 37). So what is the exact class of propositions for which authority fails, and why does authority fail for them?<sup>21</sup> This is the "fictionality puzzle," one of a cluster of puzzles traveling under the title of "imaginative resistance" (Weatherson 2004).

There is no space here for a comprehensive treatment of the fictionality puzzle, but it is worth remarking that the evidential rule suggests a solution. That solution starts by again noting the near-ubiquity of narrators in stories, even if often the narrator is effaced. The primary fictional truths therefore tend to be of the form "The narrator said P"; in the usual case, this is enough to make it the case that P is also fictional (at least when the narrator is effaced; when a narrator has a strong personality, we are more likely to regard them as potentially unreliable). The puzzle, then, is why sometimes this is not enough. The evidential rule says it is not enough when our imagined evidence does not justify P. That is, the evidential rule solves the fictionality puzzle if (i) that rule is operative in the relevant cases, and (ii) in those cases, our total imagined evidence, including (but not limited to) *the narrator said P*, is not good evidence for P. Could that be right?

In the Giselda story, the narrator says that Giselda killed her daughter, and we have no other (imagined) evidence to go on; given that we generally trust the narrator, that's good evidence that she did. The narrator also says that Giselda did the right thing, but here we do have other (imagined) evidence, namely that what she did was kill her daughter. Since this is good evidence that she did the wrong thing, our total (imagined) evidence does not justify believing that what she did was right.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>It may be that, while an author cannot make P fictional just by inserting a sentence expressing it into their story, an author can make P fictional by writing such a sentence while also working hard to set up a special kind of story world (see e.g. Weatherson 2004 or Liao et al 2014). The fictionality puzzle is then the observation that certain propositions cannot easily be made fictional.

<sup>22</sup>One might object that "Giselda killed her daughter," by itself, is not good evi-

The solution proposed here is close to one proposed by Derek Matravers:

Within the project of engaging with a fiction F, a reader should assent to [that is, imagine] some proposition p on the grounds of reading the fiction if: (a) p is asserted by the fictional narrator; (b) the reader trusts the fictional narrator; and (c) that the fictional narrator is in a sufficiently privileged epistemological position with respect to p. (Matravers 2003)

The two proposals are not exactly the same, however. Matravers encourages understanding his proposal so that it entails this condition (C): a narrator's saying P makes P fictional only if, were a news correspondent to report P, we would believe P. This is false: an author can easily make it fictional in a story that there is a three-headed frog in a children's nursery, even though we would not believe a newspaper article that said one had been observed (Weatherson 2004, 11; see also Stock 2005, 614). The proposal offered here evades this objection because it does not entail condition (C). We would not believe the news article, because our (actual) total evidence includes more than the fact that the article's author asserted various things; it also includes facts about how unlikely three-headed frogs (actually) are. But our total imagined evidence, when we read a story, does not automatically include these facts (the Reality Principle does not hold unrestrictedly), so they are not there to block our inference from the narrator's assertion.

Discussions of the fictionality puzzle often use stories philosophers have made up, rather than examples found "in the wild"; it has been suggested that this distorts our understanding of the puzzle (Todd 2009; Stock 2017). Here therefore is a real-life example. In his first great speech, in book I of *Paradise Lost* (Milton 2003), Satan, finding himself in Hell, asserts that "All is not lost," refuses to submit, observes that "through experience of this great event" (the battle against the angels evidence that she did the wrong thing; to be good the evidence must also contain the proposition that killing is prima facie wrong. In a domain less fraught than ethics, the same idea suggests that "the light is crimson" is not good evidence that the light is red; needed also is the conditional "every crimson thing is red." But now it is apparent that the objection presupposes that, if E is good evidence for P, then E entails P. This presupposition leads to inductive skepticism, so must be false. Instead, E can be good evidence for P, even if the facts in virtue of which it is are not themselves part of E.

in Heaven) he and his devils are “In arms not worse, in foresight much advanced” (lines 106, 118–19), and proclaims therefore that

We may with more successful hope resolve  
To wage by force or guile eternal war  
Irreconcilable, to our grand foe. (lines 120–23)

Evil as he may be, in this speech Satan exhibits noble fortitude and courage in the face of a great obstacle. Now after the speech the poem’s narrator comments: “So spake th’ apostate angel, though in pain, / Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair.” And here we have an instance of the fictionality puzzle. In an influential book A. J. A. Waldock asked “Has there been much despair in what we have just been listening to?,” and answers that “The speech would almost seem to be incompatible with that” (Waldock 1947, 77). Waldock is right: the narrator may say that Satan is racked with despair, but the narrator is wrong on this point. The evidential rule explains why: the narrator’s word is not all the imagined evidence we have to go on. We have also the speech itself, which displays no trace of despair. Taken together, this evidence justifies our original judgment of Satan’s inner state, not the narrator’s. As Waldock writes, “To accept Milton’s [that is, the narrator’s] comment here [...] as if it had a validity equal to that of the speech itself is surely very naive critical procedure” (1947, 77).<sup>23</sup>

One prominent proposed solution to the fictionality puzzle, due to Walton (1994) and developed by Weatherson (2004), does not get this case right.<sup>24</sup> Roughly

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<sup>23</sup>Waldock’s comment here is, in Milton studies, famous for being a core example against which Stanley Fish builds his own interpretation of the epic (Fish 1967). Fish holds that *Paradise Lost* is designed to bring readers to consciousness of their own sin, and that it (allegedly) does this in part by having its narrator “correct” mistakes that their sin causes readers to make. Fish therefore thinks the narrator is always right, even in my target passage. But even if Milton aimed to get his readers to make incorrect moral appraisals in order to ultimately help them overcome their spiritual flaws (we admire Satan at first but it is not fictional that Satan is admirable), this would not vindicate the narrator’s judgments about non-moral matters, like Satan’s psychology (whether he is racked by despair).

<sup>24</sup>While discussions of imaginative resistance are legion, many focus on solving the “imagination puzzle”—figuring out why we fail to imagine certain things; the

speaking, they hold that it can be fictional that H obtains because G does only if it could be actual that H obtains because G does (Walton 1994, Weatherston 2004; the “because” here is the “because” of metaphysical explanation). This proposal says that it cannot be fictional that Giselda acted rightly because she killed her daughter, since it cannot be true that someone acts rightly because they killed their daughter.<sup>25</sup> But no “because” claims are in view in the Milton example, and so this proposal does not explain the fictionality failure there. Walton and Weatherston are looking for a solution that uses notions from metaphysics (the “because” of metaphysical explanation); a moral to draw from this discussion is that the right solution will instead use notions from epistemology.

## 10 Conclusion

How it is determined what is fictional in a given story is a complicated matter, involving many rules of fictionality. This paper has isolated an as-yet unappreciated rule, the evidential rule, and argued that it is responsible, in many cases, for making some proposition fictional. The evidential rule also underwrites the common practice of engaging in the imaginative analogue of inquiry, when trying to figure out what is fictional in hard cases, can be a source of interpretive pluralism, and suggests a new solution to the fictionality puzzle.<sup>26</sup>

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Walton/Weatherston solution is the one aimed most directly at the fictionality puzzle (Liao and Gendler 2016 is a survey of proposals about both puzzles).

<sup>25</sup>Of course it could be that someone acted rightly because they killed their daughter and further conditions held (e.g. their daughter was certain to suffer a worse fate otherwise). For another argument against the Walton/Weatherston solution, see (Matravers 2003).

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